

The Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus



The same night he was arrested, Jesus was taken to the house of Caiaphas, the High Priest. All the lawyers and elders of Israel came together there, intent on having Jesus put to death. They needed evidence to convict him of a crime, but they failed to find any, even though false witnesses were put up who attempted to twist the truth of things Jesus had said and done.

All the while Jesus was silent. Then Caiaphas challenged him. 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?' he asked. Jesus spoke then. 'That's what you have said. I tell you that you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven.' Caiaphas went purple with anger. 'Blasphemy!' he screamed. 'Forget the witnesses. He's condemned himself!' He turned to his audience. 'You heard it?' and with one voice of mixed anger and jubilation they shouted. 'He's guilty. He deserves to die.'

The death penalty however was not in their hands. They bound him in chains and in the early morning took him to Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate did not conceal his personal interest in Jesus. 'Are you the king of the Jews?' he asked him. 'So you have said,' Jesus replied. He said nothing more however, not even to respond to the accusations of the chief priest and elders. 'Aren't you going to say anything?' Pilate asked him. 'You hear all these things they are saying against you?'. Jesus stood with his head bowed and remained silent.

Pilate was at a loss to know how to deal with the situation. He turned to Jesus' accusers. 'I see no reason to condemn this man.' 'No reason!', Caiaphas shouted at him. 'Doesn't it matter that his teaching is creating a riot in the city, just as it did in Galilee?'

Pilate saw a way out. 'Galilee? This man is a Galilean? Then let Herod decide what to do with him. Galilee was under the jurisdiction of King Herod, and he was in Jerusalem for the Passover. Herod was not displeased to have opportunity to see Jesus. He hoped secretly that Jesus would do one of his miracles for him. However, when Jesus refused to answer the king's questions, Herod was annoyed and sent him back to Pilate.

Pilate desperately wanted to free Jesus. Another idea came to him. It was a Passover custom to set one prisoner free. There was a notorious bandit in the cells this year, named Barabbas. Surely the crowd would prefer Jesus of Nazareth to Jesus Barabbas. But Pilate misjudged the crowd - or the rabble-rousers employed by the religious - and they shouted for the release of Barabbas. 'So what shall I do with Jesus of Nazareth?' he asked them. Like a great wave of hate the answer came back, 'Crucify him!' Barabbas became a free man that day.

Crucifixion is an horrific way to die. It follows mockery and beatings, and the effort of dragging your own cross member to the place of execution. The victim is stripped naked, nailed to the wood and left hanging there exposed to the world, to die a lingering death of pain and final asphyxiation

Jesus was taken to Skull hill, the burning refuse pit just outside the city. He was hung between two thieves who were crucified at the same time. Pilate, it seems, had had the last word. He had an inscription placed over Jesus' cross which read, '*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.*' The religious people demanded it to be taken down, but this time Pilate would not relent.

The suffering went on for six long hours. During all that time, as his body weakened, Jesus gasped his final words. Seven times he spoke.

His first words were a prayer for all the people who were involved in the act of crucifying him - a prayer of forgiveness. 'Father,' he prayed, 'forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'

He spoke forgiveness too to one of the thieves who died with him. That man expressed repentance for his wrong-doing and in return Jesus promised him, 'You will be with me in paradise, today !'

When Jesus spoke for a third time, labouring with every word, it was to commend his mother into John's care and to ensure that the young disciple who was so close to him would be like another son to Mary.

Even in the most intense moments of his agony, Jesus clung to the words of scripture, repeating then the words of the psalm, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

He spoke again three times - his 'I'm thirsty' brought the response of a sponge full of wine being put to his lips by means of a cane. Then at the last he summoned all his remaining strength to cry out, 'It's finished!' Finally with slow deliberation he breathed out, 'Father, I place my spirit in your hands.'

When he died, the earth trembled as though all creation felt that moment. Later it was discovered that the great curtain before the Holy Place in the Temple had been torn in two as though God himself had pulled it apart.

After the death a soldier made sure he had gone by plunging his spear into Jesus' side. The friends and onlookers gradually drifted away in the strange semi-darkness which had persisted during the final hours of Jesus' suffering.

Two wealthy men of note in Jerusalem, who were loyal to Jesus, a Pharisee called Nicodemus, and Joseph, a member of the Council who lived at Arimathea in Judaea, obtained permission from Pilate to take Jesus' body away. They arranged for him to be laid in a tomb in Joseph's Jerusalem garden, and told Jesus' friends what they had done.

So Good Friday drew to a close.

The whole world waited, knowing that nothing could ever be the same again